



LEWIS & CLARK CITY-COUNTY Health Department

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Colder Weather Signals Start of Air-Quality Monitoring Season

Wintry weather is on the way, and with it will come temperature inversions that can trap air pollution over the Helena Valley. On cold and windless days and nights, the quality of the air we breathe can deteriorate quickly when chimney smoke and vehicle exhaust collect under a layer of warmer air.

This week, the Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department began daily monitoring of air quality in its annual effort to protect the health of area residents. When air quality is poor, the department will issue temporary restrictions on indoor and outdoor burning throughout the Air Pollution Control District. The district includes the North Valley and the communities of Helena and East Helena.

During these episodes, you may be restricted from using solid-fuel burning devices like fireplaces and woodstoves until the public health risk diminishes.

Air Quality Designations

This fall, the health department has begun enforcing new air-quality regulations proposed by the Board of Health and approved in September by the state Board of Environmental Review. Under these regulations, the department will continue to designate air quality using these terms:

- **GOOD** – Particulate levels are low, and there are no restrictions on the proper use of solid-fuel burning devices.
- **WATCH** – Air quality is moderate, and particulate levels are not expected to improve. Residents are asked to voluntarily avoid or reduce the use of solid-fuel burning devices, especially fireplaces and stoves that aren't certified by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. A list of certified stoves is available on the health department website at www.lewisandclarkhealth.org under Environmental Health, Air Quality.
- **POOR** – Particulate levels are high, and the National Weather Service predicts poor dispersion conditions. Indoors, you may use only pellet stoves and EPA-certified burning devices. Smoke emitted from these devices may not exceed 20 percent opacity. Proper burning practices (see below) can help you stay within the opacity limit.

You may be fined if you violate burning restrictions during a "poor" air stage, so it's important to check air quality each time you plan to burn.

The mission of the Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department is to improve and protect the health of all Lewis and Clark County residents.

To learn the daily status of local air quality, check local media, call the health department's 24-hour air quality hotline at 406-447-1644, or sign up for daily e-mail updates at outdoorAQ@co.lewis-clark.mt.us.

Exemptions and Variances

Individuals enrolled in the Low Income Energy Assistance (LIEAP) or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs may apply for an exemption to burn an older wood-burning device when the air quality is "poor." Anyone whose gas or electric heating system is temporarily not working may also be eligible for an exemption.

If you don't meet the exemption requirements, you may still apply for a variance to the regulations. The variance will be heard before the Board of Health or a hearings officer. Exemption and variance application forms are available by calling 406-447-8351.

Smoke from woodstoves is the primary source of winter particulate air pollution throughout Lewis and Clark County. Exposure to wood smoke can cause reduced lung function, headaches, and chronic bronchitis. It can also aggravate existing lung disease.

You can minimize these negative health effects by burning a clean, hot fire. This will also cut back on creosote buildup in your chimney, which will reduce the chances of a chimney fire, as well as the amount of wood you burn – saving time and money.

Proper Burning

Here are some tips for burning properly to create a minimum of pollution:

- Make sure your stove is the right size for your needs. If your stove is too large, you will need to damp down your fires, causing smoldering.
- Use only dry, well-seasoned, medium-sized wood.
- Start your fire with small, dry kindling to establish a hot flame.
- Don't pack too many logs in your stove or fireplace. Smaller, hotter fires are more efficient and less polluting.
- Keep air intakes and dampers open enough to maintain a clean, hot fire.
- Check and clean your chimney regularly to avoid creosote buildup.

It's illegal in Montana to burn prohibited materials, such as garbage, building materials, plastics, and hazardous waste.

For more information, call the Environmental Services Division of the health department at 406-447-8351 or e-mail outdoorAQ@co.lewis-clark.mt.us.

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